“My Participation is Often Dismissed”: How Vocational School Students Participate in Society

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The precondition for a healthy democracy is the inclusion of its young people from various backgrounds in various forms of democratic participation. However, in democracies such as Finland, vocational secondary school students are not taught civic engagement and ways of becoming agenda-setters in society, as academic secondary school students are. In this research, students aged 16–26 years old from vocational secondary schools convey that they are not seen in the democratic development processes in Finland. Thus, their potential as participants in democratic processes is overlooked in society and by policymakers. This chapter argues that, while vocational secondary students are not given the civic engagement education that they need, they do act as agenda setters in numerous ways. The absence of civic education for these students continues to leave a gap in Finland’s democracy. Its educational system fails to value and foster the democratic participation of all young people.

KEYWORDS: Youth Participation; Vocational Schools; Civic Engagement Education.

Introduction

The precondition for the democratic development of a society is the participation of youth from various backgrounds in democratic processes such as grassroots actions and policymaking. In particular, if leaders and citizens desire to achieve the goal of establishing and maintaining equal, inclusive, and sustainable societies, the active participation and empowerment of all youth is an essential requirement for lasting, legitimate change. However, all young people may not be empowered, taught, or traditionally seen as participants in societal and political change processes. Additionally, officials and politicians may overlook the value and expertise of young people from vocational studies backgrounds. Moreover, research that focuses on youth participation may only take into account the political participation that is tied to institutions, such as voting, official legislative processes, and youth councils.

Finland, as an established, stable, and prosperous democracy, is a suitable case study to explore the dichotomy between what types and how much civic engagement education academic secondary school students and vocational secondary school students are offered. Overall, civic participation is taught and encouraged in Finnish society. Yet, in academic secondary schools, which traditionally lead to university spots, civic engagement education and related topics are largely
integrated into the basic curriculum, whereas in vocational secondary schools, which do not traditionally lead to university spots and direct youth immediately into the workforce, these topics are often only in selective studies categories. These course categories are not mandatory, so encouragement and education for active social participation can be missing altogether in their schooling. Thus, in Finland, young people are divided in terms of how much—if any—civic education they receive in adolescence based on where they have been tracked in their secondary education.

There has been little research on the views of young people from different secondary educational backgrounds regarding their political participation and the students’ understanding of the nature of participation. Specifically, we do not know how vocational secondary school students frame participation and how, if at all, they themselves act as participants in less formal ways and how they act as agenda setters in society. By agenda setting I refer to actors, such as young people, who can influence discussions and raise issues salient to them in offline and online debates from grassroots to policy levels, with the aim(s) of influencing society. Agenda setting is the process where actors, including youth, use framing to create their understanding of issues, actors, events, and such political concepts as participation. This framing then impacts their views on participation and how they think that they can best influence and participate in society and even if they think that they should or can participate.

It is important to understand how young vocational school students understand participation because it is only then that we can formulate an understanding as to how the young people participate and by which means, rather than focusing on those traditional means of participation that adults view as relevant. The formal and traditional means of participation include such activities as law-drafting and participating in youth councils, whereas less formal means of participation might include social media discussions and activism, offline grassroots activism, and consumer behavior.

This chapter presents some research focused on the participation of youth vocational school students and highlights the need for further research on this group. I asked this group: what, if anything, it means to them to participate and whether they see themselves as agenda setters in society. From these results, I argue that, if democracies are to be equitable and truly inclusive, we must recognize, develop, and support the value of participation of young people from all backgrounds. Only by also fostering civic participation of vocational secondary students at the same level as secondary academic students can we encourage and expect lifelong civic participation, fully representative democratic governments, and stable, inclusive societies.

The plan of this chapter is to first review the significance of developing participatory models and education for youth in vocational settings. Then, I provide an overview of the methodology and parameters of the research and the conduct of the workshops. The next section outlines the actual workshop process, explaining how responses were collected. Fourth, I present some qualitative results from the youth studied and combine their responses to form an understanding of their frames for participation and their potential roles in social, political, and economic agenda setting.

**The Importance of Youth Participation**

Although the wider discussion on societal views on youth participation is beyond the scope of this chapter, we may note that youth participation is a central principle in Finnish legislation, in the UN’s Agenda 2030, which guarantees the rights for all youth to participate in politics and society.\(^2\) Also, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights states, “everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”\(^3\) In addition, the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees the right of children to participate.\(^4\) Moreover, the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 focuses on engaging, enabling, and strengthening the participation of EU’s young people in policies and society at various levels.\(^5\)

Key, powerful actors’ understandings are framed in selective ways.\(^6\) Frames create and influence political, social, and economic institutions and change processes. In practice, this means that the gatekeeper’s understandings or narratives are traditionally the salient ones. For example, such
gatekeeper-designed frames regarding participation may privilege the views of young people in traditional youth councils versus those who participate in climate change protests and civil rights movements elsewhere. Or, these frames may fail to acknowledge or incorporate the participation of young people from non-political studies backgrounds, such as is the case with students from vocational schools. An example of this exclusion is the Youth Barometer 2018 study in Finland which only focused on measuring interests and participation as voting in elections or being tied to institutions such as youth councils or political parties and processes. In limiting participation to these categories, one may incorrectly conclude that young vocational school students are non-participants, uninterested, and silent. Youth are often studied for their participation, but the use of only traditional categories for participation may “pit” the two groups of students against each other.

Previous studies, such as Checkoway and Gutiérrez (2006), have shown that including young people in youth parliament and institutionally-tied mechanisms of participation can advance active citizenship and integration into society and societal decision-making structures and processes. Other studies such as Walsh, Black, and Prosser (2018), for example, focus on youth who can be described as agenda setters, with the emphasis on class distinctions, such as belonging to middle-to-upper class backgrounds. Studies like these tend to create a power relationship between young people from and at different socio-economic backgrounds, which then fosters the notion that participation, agenda-setting abilities, and change agency is tied to existing participatory structures which are mostly accessible to wealthier youth who are viewed as “valuable” participants. Gretschel and Kiiilakoski (2012) say that demonstrations are youth-driven ways to participate in society and are a way to make one’s voice heard. Andersson (2018) claims that youth do not have influence in the legislative processes because “...decision makers decide what they think young people want.” Also Walgrave and Van Aelst (2016) highlight the power of the political elite to influence or update policies, which can easily lead to excluding vocational school students.

Indeed, reasons for encouraging youth participation can vary from being a means to satisfy the (economic) interests of decision makers, preparation for ‘real’ political participation in the future such as voting, and promoting the right—i.e., approved—behavior based on the interest of decision makers, to viewing participation as a democratic and political right. Thus, the identity of who defines ‘participation’ is important.

Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen (2019) use the concept of “societal participation” to refer to participation of an individual or a group in the processes of the society, such as voting or participating in decision making, or engaging in political discussions. However, Piškur et al. (2014) assert that (social) participation has not been explicitly defined. Some argue that societal participation must have intersectional views. Hästbacka, Nygård, and Nyqvist (2016) say that the complex concept of societal participation can mean various things and is highly related to the context of the research and participation. The authors continue to state that the term “societal” can be connected with other dimensions of one’s life, such as political participation or employment. Some authors press the connection between societal and political participation. For instance Ekman and Amnä (2012) highlight the multidimensionality of both concepts. Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsalouma (2018) examine youth participation in societal issues in the context of a wider human rights perspective of exclusivity and accessibility, as well as in the realms of digital services. Moreover, Meriläinen and Piispa (2020) researched the participation of vocational school students and found many ways in which young people participate in climate change actions by using formats outside of the institutional forms such as law-drafting and voting. Students’ participation in demonstrations and the usage of social media are part of self-determined means to use one’s voice and to execute democratic participation regarding climate change.

Still further, Cahill and Dadvand (2018) argue that we should acknowledge that not everyone has equal access to the discourses that allow them to take up certain positions because some may adopt more dominant roles, while others may be relegated to subservient positions within the social space. This can manifest in interpersonal relationships as well as within institutional practices and structures. Ten Brummelaar et al. (2018) found various narratives that illustrate how young people have limited possibilities for ‘meaningful’ participation in decision-making and their
participation does not always seem meaningful or really impact a decision concerning them.\textsuperscript{24}

In other cases, the lack of civic engagement training of vocational students has a clear impact. For example, those who have a legal education and can speak the legal language have an advantage because of their knowledge of legal language, concepts, and mechanisms.\textsuperscript{25} Actors such as civil servants, those in the economic sector, and researchers have more powerful positions in the law-drafting process than other actors because of their knowledge and experience.\textsuperscript{26} Cahill and Dadvand argue that participation may or may not produce social good, since it may replicate the patterns of inequality or the status quo, or even deepen discourses which categorize, segregate, and stigmatize those who do not attend university.\textsuperscript{27}

Finally, evaluation of political participation of vocational secondary school students is largely missing from international literature on youth political engagement. A recent study by Meriläinen and Piispa (2020) is a step to bridge the gap by showing that vocational school students do indeed participate in the society as agenda setters and are interested in political issues such as climate change and human & LGBTQI rights, while some studies tend to paint the picture that vocational school students are not interested.\textsuperscript{28} The authors did show that Finnish vocational school students are not silent, but in to some degree believe that their participation is not valued, seen, or heard in the society. These researchers explored the participation of vocational school students and found many ways in which young people participate in climate change actions outside the traditional ways tied to institutions, though young vocational school students felt that their participation was not seen or taken seriously. This topic was not previously studied among vocational school students. Climate activism studies in particular can be almost inclusively done among so-called youth activists and among those who are titled as youth activists. Mirroring the results from Meriläinen and Piispa, in a recent youth survey done in a medium-size city in Finland, 74\% of the respondents said that they act more environmentally friendly in society, but adults do not take their forms of climate participation into account.\textsuperscript{29}

Overall, as Kallio and Häkli (2013) argue, youth participation can increase if practical means to do so are provided to them.\textsuperscript{30} Their forms of participation need to be seen, as they may not be heard or included in traditional legislative processes,\textsuperscript{31} and we need ways to measure these forms both before age 18 and afterwards. We also need to acknowledge that, as Head (2011) argues “[the final] argument in favor of enhanced youth participation centres on the developmental benefits which are claimed to emerge from the experience of young people being engaged in various forms of social participation. These benefits may be at the individual or the wider social levels.”\textsuperscript{32} Being heard and the hope that this voice gives them helps young people to learn that they can be constructive members in society as we build solutions to problems such as climate change, racism, and other human rights issues.\textsuperscript{33} Young people who are not active in traditional ways may be regarded as non-active or gated from participation, despite perhaps being active elsewhere in other issue arenas such as hobbies, social media, or local demonstrations.\textsuperscript{34} In some cases, young people are not empowered as they do not have the information needed to participate, while others may simply not be interested.\textsuperscript{35} Or, some young people may be disregarded because their views do not fit into current political agendas.\textsuperscript{36} Also, Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden (2006) claim that “minority youth lag behind Anglos in terms of their opportunities to practice democratic skills and their understanding of politics” to which they add “minority students hold more negative attitudes about politics and are less attached to the political system.”\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, distributions of power, position, and resources permit some youth to become gatekeepers, while others remain gated and have a less influential position in decision making processes.\textsuperscript{38} In this line, Feldman (2000) states that power relations and narratives influence legislative processes, which may result in silencing, excluding and othering groups such as minorities, and disregarding their views.\textsuperscript{39} These concerns are all tied to the issue of real participation and who in fact participates.

\section*{Methodology and Workshop Design}

Vocational training and education is designed both for young people without upper secondary
qualifications and for adults already in the workforce. Traditionally young people apply, and if accepted, enroll in vocational school or high school education after elementary school. Some young people complete a joint degree where they study in vocational school and also complete the matriculation examination from high school. This study focused on youth, which, according to the Finnish Youth Act, refers to people under 29 years old, though this sample only includes those aged 16–26 years old. The dataset consists of 185 vocational school students who provided qualitative responses gathered from questionnaires and written workshop works obtained in 23 workshops held at vocational schools in five municipalities in western Finland between 2018–2020. The workshops were held in classes which focused on various fields of study to reach as diverse of a group of students as possible. This research was conducted with students in their own language (Finnish) and gathered where young people were easily approachable as research partners—the schools.

Workshops were chosen as a process to gather information because they can be conducted in more open and free learning atmospheres and surroundings versus traditional classroom teaching settings, which may also increase their utility as a teaching method for civic engagement. Workshops have also been shown as a useful teaching method to engage with young people and get their viewpoints directly from them. If researchers seek to gain insights from young people, they should listen to people in their own surroundings and go where those people are. Echoing the findings of Lapadat et al. (2020), when young people are given clear tasks but also the option of movement to be creative in an engaging context, workshops are a useful method, but they call for careful planning. When workshops are designed, multiple factors must be addressed. For example, Lapadat et al. and Cahill and Dadvand have observed that power relations between young people and adults exist.

Moreover, these researchers raise the need to allow young people anonymity, the importance of understanding ethical issues such as various disabilities, differences in language skills, and differences in accessing information in dealing with young people, and their time constraints. Also, anonymity allows young participants to express their opinions freely, especially if the purpose is to gather information from young people. As Lapadat et al. say, research that involves youth may involve additional time, communication, support, and attentiveness to the power differentials. Further, the youths’ motivations in participating in the workshops may differ from adults and academic researchers, and it is important to acknowledge both groups’ priorities. These may be, for example, researchers’ time restrictions and need to gather data quickly, or young people’s need to simply get a mark of attendance from the workshops.

The vocational school research was designed, carried out, and analyzed by the author alone. The author consulted teachers at the vocational schools throughout the design process in case questions arose. Also, during the workshops, if any impediments arose, the workshop plan was altered to fit the goals of the researcher and the needs of the students. A clear example of this adaptation was a behavioral issue—bullying—which arose in two workshops where students bullied each other before the workshops in other classes. The bullying was addressed head on by the researcher in front of the group and one-on-one with the young students involved to ensure that no more bullying occurred. Finally, one can also say that the vocational school students acted as consultants by evaluating the workshops.

The following steps were taken to set up the cooperation between the researcher, vocational school students, and vocational school teachers. First, preliminary discussions occurred in person between the researcher and the vocational school about the possibility of conducting the research, the purposes of the research, the operative plan of the research, and the expected outcomes. After these meetings, the university where the author was working compiled the research permit between the City of Tampere and the vocational school. Next, oral agreements and email discussions finalized agreements between the researcher and the vocational teachers regarding the parameters of cooperation, design, and conduct of the research. For the sake of the youths’ anonymity, the names of the participating municipalities are not stated here per those agreements and the permit. In the age of social media, there is a possibility that the students could be identified through
coordinating identifiers like field of study and municipalities named in the answers, and thus no identifying information was gathered, even though this information may have bolstered the research. Finally, the timetables for the workshops depended on the time slot in the curriculum in each municipality.

In these workshops, the young vocational students participated in discussions of various issues. The workshops were designed to fit the existing curriculum, were integrated into multiple study subjects, and were between 2–3 ½ hours long. The issues were chosen by the researcher to focus on the topic of the research project she was working on at the university. The research focused on the participation of vocational school students in the society. However, the discussions were in no way limited to those topics, as the students were free to bring about notions from other areas as well. Discussion was based on open communication and free expression. The data collected included written workshop documents and post-workshop questionnaires which were distributed during the class in a Word document. They were sent back to the researcher via email either by the students or by the teacher as a Word document (see questionnaire). The results were then divided into four narrative categories, with presentation of select direct quotes below to illustrate the findings.

Narrative research has previously been utilized in traditional communication and organizational as well as multidisciplinary human rights and power relations research. This research framework maintains that different frames, and thus understandings, by various actors have to be communicated for change to happen. Framing is a mandatory and essential aspect of any social context, such as discussions, including policymaking, and every actor uses it. In this case, I sought to reveal how young vocational school students frame, and thus understand, their participation, how they view themselves as agenda setters in society (or not), and what barriers they see which may limit or block their political and social participation.

This research does have limitations. First, it was not designed as a comparative experiment. Thus, there is no comparison in the data with academic secondary school students or with vocational secondary school students in other countries. Second, no quantitative data was gathered, as this was exploratory research to determine if larger studies are warranted. The only requirements for participation were enrollment in one of the selected Finnish vocational schools and being part of the 16–26 age group. Third, no identifying information from the students was collected, as explained above, so differences based on different gender identities, those who are in the older youth group versus the younger youth group, or the groups at various locations cannot be ascertained. Fourth, there was no quantification of the coding of the qualitative data (example: how many times a certain word or phrase appeared) due to language translation issues. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the lessons learned from this study will spark further research and changes in vocational secondary education around the world which include increased civic engagement education.

Workshop Process And Data Collection

During the researcher-led workshops, the students discussed and answered qualitative questions on topics such as, but not limited to: their lives, hopes, dreams, their areas of study, their views on social and political participation, law, and climate change. Each student was given a laptop to use by the vocational school, which is common practice in Finland, or desktop computers were made available. Also, once the workshops started, students were welcomed to use other devices, such as cell phones if they had them, to find information, initiate discussion on the topics of the workshop, or provide written data to the researcher. The written works and the questionnaires could be returned to the researcher during the workshops on paper, printed on the school’s devices and returned to the researcher, or sent to the researcher’s work email address. If the data was emailed, the researcher added the data to the collection site on the university’s internal server and completely deleted the email.

There were two periods of data gathering April 2018–May 2019 and October 2019–March 2020. In the first set, which included 17 workshops of 90 total students, the topics that we discussed included participation, equality, bullying, sustainable development, a happy life, and legislative
processes under the larger umbrella of human rights. After discussing the themes in a free-flowing manner, the students prepared and wrote short presentations on the topic(s) of their choosing and presented them to the class. In the second set, which included six workshops of 95 total students, the main topics were participation, influencing society, climate change, and youth views on what constitutes a good life. There were fewer workshops than planned in the second data set due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The workshops started in the students' regularly assigned classrooms. The vocational class teacher introduced the researcher, and then the researcher started the workshop by presenting the project, its design, and its purpose. First, the researcher led the discussion to get it started. The discussions continued first in one big group with all the students and then the students broke into small groups. The students could choose a small group of two to five people or do individual assignments to discuss with the researcher. After this beginning, students were free to use the other facilities of the vocational school, such as cafes and hallways. Some used the classroom, while others took advantage of other places on the school grounds. Students had the formal right to decline to participate in the study individually or in the smaller groups. They were free to ask questions at any time during the study from the researcher.

Given the purpose of the project to understand their definitions and their frames, students were not provided with an adult-derived definition of participation. To ensure equal possibilities to participate online and offline, participatory methods were created to help those with various disabilities or language barriers or anxiety in group situations. Help was provided by first identifying the need for help, and in one case, a student acted as an interpreter between another student and the researcher because the young person could not speak Finnish or English but was willing to speak in her native language. To offer help and to diffuse these situations, the students were free to leave the workshop if they wished and were free to complete the workshop work at home.

Students were given various options to participate. The students could also use pen and paper if they felt uncomfortable using computers or laptops. The researcher offered to help with writing either by using paper or a computer. Also, if anyone felt that they did not or could not write, the researcher interviewed or simply talked with the young person/persons and made notes. Students were not forced to do group assignments or to speak out if they felt pressure or anxiety speaking out loud. The students had the possibility to work alone, do written assignments and leave the workshop if they felt uncomfortable.

The Results

The resulting qualitative data was coded and analyzed to develop a picture of how youth vocational secondary school students understand or frame participation, how they see themselves—as participants, and what barriers they perceive to participation. Through this content analysis, five categories or narratives emerged:

- Narrative 1: Participation as understood by youth vocational secondary school students.
- Narrative 2: How young people from vocation schools participate.
- Narrative 3: How they feel that participation is viewed by decision makers.
- Narrative 4: How vocational school students view participation in legislative processes.
- Narrative 5: How young people name obstacles in their participation.

This research method has previously been utilized in various studies relating to human rights, youth participation, and power relations research. Based on the results, the workshops were useful in creating discussions between young people but also between young people and the researcher, and sufficient data was acquired to make some conclusions, discussed below. Overall, the youth had varying understandings of participation and how youth could participate to address issues such as
climate change and racism. Only a handful of participants were interested in institutionally-tied types of participation, such as legislative processes.

Narrative 1: Participation as understood by youth vocational secondary school students

Based on the data, the students had several frames of participation which they used to create their understanding of participation. For them participation is about “being part of something” and “having an influence.” One student said that “participation is about the feeling of being part of something bigger, and also the feeling of being able to influence it [without defining “it”].” Similarly, another said that participation is having one’s voice heard:

“There are many good ways to get your opinion out, but then the content needs to be thought-provoking and have an emotional impact in order to change people’s attitudes.”

Interestingly, based on the students’ answers, for them participation was not simply “having an impact.” Rather, it was a combination of taking actions, being connected, making personal choices, belonging, sharing opinions, and having an impact. Moreover, participation included areas of life such as relationships, studying, work, and hobbies as well belonging to an NGO and influencing (something) through those organizations. This example is telling:

“I could have influence by joining some youth influencer organization and share my opinion via that.”

Also, some students had thought-provoking ideas regarding participation.

“The experience of participation arises when you are involved in something that has effects beyond yourself, such as people or the environment. The opposite of this is the feeling of incompetence, it is a common curse in societies that have lost their lives, that individuals feel separated from the group and loneliness and consequently helplessness take them over.”

Narrative 2: How young people from vocation schools participate

This narrative illustrates how young people framed their own participation in society, whether they did participate, and where, if at all. Based on the data, the students did participate in societal issues such as fighting against climate change and for human rights issues. They participated in various ways, mainly through personal choices, for example, by engaging in discussions about climate change with friends, classmates, and family members, discussing the untold negative effects of electric cars on social media, engaging in recycling and responsible consumption, reducing their use of plastics and waste packaging, buying from flea markets, eating sustainable foods, and being part of student organizations, which are common in Finland. These organizations focus on students’ wellbeing and education but also on societal and political debates. Some students felt that their field of study made them more prone to participate and did not feel that anyone was silencing or “gating” them.

When asked if the youth could detail any experiences of participation, the students mention, for example, taking part in LGBTQI Pride demonstrations or signing petitions for human rights, peace, or advancing a cause. Moreover, for some the reality was not an either or situation but rather one where they “cannot” participate or “don’t know” about participation or ways to participate:

“My chances of influencing society at the moment are quite slim. Only by
voting can there be some effect, because again boomers do not want to listen to or believe the youth about what would be best for the society, for example, on equality and protection of nature and the climate.”

“I don’t really feel that I have an impact on society, at least not yet, maybe when I’m older and when my name counts for more.”

Some youth were skeptical and not interested in social and political participation.

“There may certainly be opportunities to participate, but I have no interest in influencing or participating.”

“I guess there are those possibilities but I will not use them.”

“Not participating is just great, [I] don’t have to take a stance on anything.”

Overall, what emerged was that vocational school students have several understandings of what participation is, and they frame it in various ways. They participate by taking everyday actions online and offline, also as consumers; they are concerned with issues such as climate change, electric cars, racism, and bullying; and they take part in demonstrations. Moreover, their concerns causally flow through their personal lives to studies and future employment. They are active in discussions at school, speak with friends online and in social media, disseminate information, and sign petitions, and they have casual means of participation that are akin to bandwagoning. For them, this is social and/or political participation.

**Narrative 3: How they feel that participation is viewed by decision makers**

Similarly, the actions of decision makers were mentioned as an important factor in the students’ participation. Some students said that decision makers do not care about young vocational school students, whereas others simply wished for respect when they participate:

“Participation makes a person feel that they are part of something, for example, an organization or just one’s schoolmates. Appreciation and respect within one’s own community is part of participation.”

However, some of the students felt powerless and even apathetic because they saw that their participation was not appreciated or seen as credible by the decision makers. Also many young people said that they do not have “word power.”

“It’s hard for a small person to get their voices heard. Small everyday actions are the ones where you play your main part in changing things.”

“I’m not interested in influencing society, because I don’t believe I have enough strength to influence things and it is useless to use up energy for such issues which I get nothing out of.”

**Narrative 4: How vocational school students view participation in legislative processes**

Although some young people did see themselves as influencing society and participating in social and political issues in various ways, traditional legislative processes were more unfamiliar to the students. Though the students could name various laws and detail their content in relation to their lives, the world, and their future professions, many saw no reason to change them. The laws
that the youth discussed were tied to their own lives or area of study and the future profession for which they were studying. Many of the students regarded the current laws they knew about as “functional,” but some argued that they should be taught more at vocational schools. According to the students, the most taught laws connected to their fields of study, human rights, and labor rights.

“In my opinion there is no need to change the laws because they are functional.”

“I feel that the laws related to my field of study are functional and I don’t feel that they need to be changed. However I do feel that there needs to be improvements in teaching about them and how they are highlighted. It would have been nice to learn more about them during the first year [of studies].

“I have not yet encountered a law that would not be functional. Only shortages in actualization of laws.”

However some students, with a few skeptical exceptions, did say that laws have already been modified and need to be even further modified to improve working conditions and equality in society, for example, as well as to tighten up the penal code with regard to environmental laws or to combat climate change. Some students were afraid of the improvement of women’s rights, and some students stated that issues such as bullying and human rights violations towards the LGBTQI need to be addressed better in legislation.

“Yes legislation should be modified so that everyone should have some kind of position, for example, in how to act in cases of bullying or in some other situations.”

“ICT [information and communication technology]-sector….in many laws, the politicians can be very far behind.”

“Improving equality is challenging because it affects almost everything we do, but it is not impossible.”

Many students said that the way they have become familiar with the laws was through studies, work, and other aspects of their own lives. One student became familiar with marriage law through a family member and a reality TV-personality. This example shows how young people get information from non-traditional ways and how they tie the information gained from celebrities to their own lives, also related to laws and legislation.

“[Kim Kardashian] wondered if it would be worthwhile for her to change her last name after her wedding or to take a combination last name and how those names would work. I have also come across other laws.”

When asked if they would be interested in being part of the legislative process, the majority of the students said they were not. However, others did say that they are interested in being part of the legislative processes either alone or with a larger group in order to change laws. Some students said that they would like to be involved in discussions with decision makers, the police, and other actors involved in legislation to hear “why they decided the way that they did.”

The responses below show some of the students expressing a desire to be involved in legislative processes:

“I would always like to be involved in the consultation processes that address the facilities I have designed or projects that I have been involved in. I would
like to be present in a concrete manner or have a conversation with someone who is involved in the [the law drafting] process.”

“I would be interested in giving ideas based on my experiences to a member of the parliament or independently [to someone].”

“I would be interested to take part through an organization. I could hear various points of views from the other members of the organization... and I could widen my own viewpoint in this way. From the organization I could also get my own kind of assurance... Thru an organization, issues would be taken into consideration more easily than hearing about it from the mouth of only one person.”

“If there would be a possibility, I could participate independently.”

One student had a strong vision of who should be listened to in legislative processes:

“Marginalized, lonely and those rejected by society as well as those who many believe belong to the lower class [should be consulted during the law-drafting processes] because they often have real experiences and views regarding this world and its legislation, and when it has not worked or treated people as people. Those are actors who truly have that grassroots understanding of issues!”

Narrative 5: How young people name obstacles in their participation

Relating to the focus of the research, the data shows that young people said that they can participate in society in various ways. However, they felt that they are not listened to in society and that “old people” and “boomers” do not want young people to participate. Also, some said they do not care whether they are listened to or not. Interestingly, some said that they are scared to take part as agenda setters and are afraid of being bullied by friends, other young people, and adults—basically anyone who sees their participation online and offline. They said they do have possibilities to participate but still feel invisible, lacking the power to be active and visible. Most notably, many youths felt that their participation does not matter since they are seen as the “silent” ones.

Even when young people said that they participated, some felt apathy, believing they would not be listened to by gatekeepers or other adults. This points to a lack of empowerment and also perhaps to the effects of negative experiences, such as bullying, and is highlighted in this remark: “You are the first one who has shown any interest in what I think about things,” while another said, “I don’t know how to say it in a smart way,” showing that some of the students framed themselves as gated actors. One student said that it makes them sick that gatekeepers such as President Trump and other “grown-ups are bullying Greta [Thunberg],” which in turn makes participation less appealing and contributes to an understanding that participation is scary and results in being bullied by the central gatekeepers—boomers.

“If the issue is important, then it would be nice to be making decisions... however societal discussion and decision making feel distant.”

“Comes the feeling, that I guess I sit silently.”

“It does not feel good to be silenced. Society silences.”

“I don’t really feel that I have an impact on society, at least not yet, maybe when I’m older and when there is more power in [my] name.”

Moreover, based on their answers, they strongly felt that they are not “smart” or knowledgeable enough to participate:
“I could not create a rational/sane law, so I will leave that to smarter [people].”
“A lot should be done but you cannot do everything so you get the feeling I am completely useless.”

On the other side, some students were very clear they did not want to be part of the legislative processes and have no interest in laws because the subject was “boring.”

“[Regarding legislative processes.] I’m not interested because I feel that the subject is boring.”

Based on the results, young vocational school students participate in society as agenda setters. They are interested in profound societal and political topics such as climate change, racism, human rights, and their and others well-being. However, at the same time, those acting as agenda setters fear bullying, and silencing in society hinders participation. They also fear that adults will bully them if they become agenda setters. At the same time, not all students cared to participate and they were uninterested in issues outside their own living spaces.

Based on these narratives, young vocational school students had various understandings of what participation was, how they participate, and what motivated them but also who should be listened to in the society—including young vocational school students.

**Conclusion**

The study suggests that young people in vocational secondary schools need to be educated, inspired, empowered, and seen as legitimate actors in grassroots and legislative/policy making processes to create better and more sustainable social, political, and economic policies. Their non-traditional forms of participation must be recognized in society, and vocational students must be respected as equal, active participants. Additionally, leaders and gatekeepers may overlook the possible hidden expertise and not recognize the value of the participation of these young people, and they should take a long-term view of these youths’ voices rather than stay tied to their own frameworks and political agendas. Several students knew about and showed specific knowledge of various laws and spoke about how to apply the laws to their own lives, for example, their interests and future professions. Yet, officials and policymakers may be disregarding young people who do have knowledge that is in fact relevant to the democratic political process.

At the worst, this situation creates apathy, ignores the benefits of the development of long-term and inclusive citizen participation, and fosters a gap between young people by creating somewhat artificial distinctions between active and less-active youth, thus gatekeeper and gated youth. It speaks more to the assumed credibility and decision-making power of the gatekeepers and their perceived unwillingness to listen to those young people who have traditionally been invisible and inactive in the eyes of policy makers. This positioning could be amplified in years to come and create a wider gap between those who attended vocational secondary schools and others who attended academic secondary schools, perpetuating class and workforce distinctions which may divide rather than unite society. Further research is needed beyond this preliminary study to explore this gap in the civic engagement education literature throughout different countries if we are indeed to build stable, healthy democracies. In the meantime, leaders and educators can act now to recognize this gap and improve civic engagement education opportunities for all secondary school students, regardless of the type of institution. If all of these students really are to be equal participants in our societies, then we must start by giving them equal support, tools, voices, and experiences to contribute to our democracies.

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Endnotes


27. Cahill and Dadvand, 2018.
42. Cahill and Dadvand, 2018; Lapadat et al., 2020.
43. Lapadat et al., 2020.


47. The direct quotations presented in this chapter come from the participants in the vocational school workshops and the questionnaires that the students answered. All of the questionnaires were completed anonymously, and no identifying information was collected. Individual students cannot be identified from the citations used in this chapter. The answers have been translated to English from their original Finnish by the researcher. The research ethics guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) were followed in collecting and processing the material. Also, a research permit to complete the research was acquired by the researcher, Tampere University, Finland. This was deemed sufficient enough by the employer of the researcher, Tampere University, Finland.